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ABSTRACT

Advertising programs have an obligation to teach job search skills to their students and it is in their own best interests to do so. The rationale for this is threefold. First, advertising programs must command the respect of the professionals in the field, because professionals represent the employment market and are increasingly becoming sources of financial support for the programs. Second, an increasing assessment movement nationwide causes schools to want to demonstrate the competency of their graduates. And third, the accrediting criteria of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication require that programs regularly assess their graduates in those fields and also that they provide students with distinctly career enhancing professional experiences. In view of the relationship between professional success of graduates and school funding, faculty resources and time must be dedicated to the coordination and management of placement activities. At the University of Tennessee, a placement program was instituted in which much of the information and instruction that students need to secure jobs was assembled into a one-credit required professional seminar for advertising majors. The seminar addresses such topics as resume writing, interviewing, cover letters, and career choices and planning. At the same time, changes in the program focused on admissions and how to more fully professionalize candidates. The seminar includes a focus on career options, largely incorporated into a number of visits to local businesses connected with advertising. The payoff from the seminar has been excellent, including enhanced reputation and greater student success. All schools should accept the responsibility of teaching job skills, integrate a similar seminar into the curriculum, provide students with professional contacts, regularly experiment with the course, and implement a tracking system. (HB)

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On the Value Of a Professional Seminar For Advertising Majors

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Abstract: How much responsibility do advertising educators bear for the professional careers of their students? How can job search instruction be incorporated into an advertising curriculum? These questions are addressed in this paper, a descriptive study of how one advertising program approaches the professional development of students. The study is offered not as exemplar but rather as an example of one possible solution to the dilemma of how to integrate job search skills instruction into a program with a managerial emphasis.

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On the Value of A Professional Seminar for Advertising Majors

Throughout the 100 years or so of advertising education in the United States, a certain tension has existed regarding its role and purpose. This tension has been framed in several ways and has been labeled the vocational emphasis of the journalism schools vs. the managerial perspective of the business program, a how-to-do-it emphasis vs. a "why" philosophy, a "first job," practice/theory, specialized, predominately inductive perspective vs. a "last job," theory/practice, generalized, predominately deductive perspective (Rotzoll & Barban, 1984).

Of central concern in either philosophy is whether and how much responsibility advertising educators should bear for the professional careers of students. If academic preparation is geared to helping students find the first job (vocational emphasis), it follows that not only the skills needed in the first job should be taught but also how to find the first job so that those skills can be used should be taught. If academic preparation is geared to helping students find their "last job," it also follows that skills to find the "first job" should be taught so that one may someday have a "last job."

This paper argues that whether advertising programs see their mission as preparing students for their "first job" or their "last job," advertising programs have an obligation to teach job search skills to their students and that it is in their own best interests to do so. We offer (1) the rationale for doing so, and (2) a description of how, at the University of

Tennessee, we have been able to implement such a program. Our program seems to work well for us and our students, and we position it not as exemplar but rather as an example of how educators at other institutions may develop a solution that is suitable to their faculty and students.

Rationale. Why should advertising educators feel any responsibility to prepare students for the job market? Why should any professional school? There are three good arguments.

First, advertising programs must command the respect of the professionals in the field because professionals, who represent the employment market, are increasingly becoming sources of financial support for the programs. Program reputation is likely to depend equally on the impressions and records of the program's worst graduates as well as its best, a somewhat sobering point. Whether we like it or not, the very poorest representatives of the more than 6,000 advertising degree-holders from 1991 (Ross & Johnson, 1992) are in the job market with possibly poorly-written, typo-riddled resumes and cover letters trying to find a job in a poor economy. As an eye-opening experience, program administrators might ask their five worst students to share their resumes with them.

Second, as the outcomes assessment movement spreads across the country, universities are being asked to demonstrate the competency of their graduates. One of the tools of outcomes assessment has been alumni and employer satisfaction surveys. In some universities, assessment measurements are being translated

into state legislature funding formulas for state universities.

Third, Standard 11 of the ACEJMC accrediting criteria (ACEJMC, 1991) requires that programs "assess regularly the experience of its graduates who seek work in journalism and mass communications and incorporate that assessment into its program evaluation process," and explains that "a unit should provide its graduates...with a distinct advantage in their first employment and with a depth of educational experience that contributes positively to their career development."

Thus, the factors of (1) the intertwining of program reputation with outside funding, (2) the relationship of program performance and state financing, and (3) the expectations of accreditation procedures suggest that advertising and other communications programs need to teach job search skills.

A simplistic solution suggests that university placement services combined with extracurricular activities such as student clubs with career-focused activities and students' own initiative would produce an acceptable solution. After all, most universities have career planning centers and workshops; there is a multitude of resume-writing and interviewing publications among the business and self-help sections of most bookstores; and most academic programs do sponsor a related student club.

Each of these activities represent an element of a workable solution, but there is practically no coordination among these diverse activities. And as much as we wish it to be true, many students do not take the initiative to prepare an acceptable

resume on their own. Many will delay the task until near or after graduation.

The allocation of faculty resources and time to the mundane tasks of resume writing, cover letter writing, and interviewing becomes critical in those programs that follow a managerial perspective. Much greater demands are placed on faculty for research and publication, and the available time for individual student advising and career counseling is restricted. It is clearly an inefficient use of faculty time to teach the basics of resume writing and job-search skills on a continuing one-on-one basis. However, programs that ignore such issues do so at their own peril.

Genesis. At Tennessee in the mid-1980s faculty were spending inordinate amounts of time in individual academic advising and career counseling. We began in 1984 and have continued each year to survey the graduating class regarding its success in the job market. We collect data regarding starting salaries, types of employment, employers, job duties, and graduates' rating of the perceived value of their degree. A common comment from our graduates in the 1980s, even those who seemed to have little difficulty in finding employment, was this one:

> I learned quite a bit in the classroom, but I would have benefitted from more contact with professionals. I needed to know more about what I could do with my degree.

Obviously, as a faculty, we were not doing an adequate job in teaching job search skills. However, with a faculty/student

ratio of 1:45 then and a three-course teaching load it was also obvious that faculty, who also had increasing demands being placed on them for research and publication, could not devote more time to individual career counseling.

One option would have been to close our doors to students and work only with the most persistent. A second option would have been to decline any responsibility for helping students move from the classroom to the work force. A third option, which we adopted, was to formalize much of the information and instruction that students need by creating a one-hour, for-credit seminar that meets twice a week for eight weeks and is required of all advertising majors. The seminar addresses the topics of resume writing, interviewing, cover letter writing, and career choices. After four years of teaching the professional seminar, we have found it to be a workable solution to the dilemma of how to incorporate career instruction into an advertising program with a managerial emphasis.

Corollary Changes. At the time we were moving to formalize the professional seminar, several other changes were made in department operations that ultimately helped the seminar to work. First, we moved to a formal procedure for admissions, advising, and counseling students, all of which were intended to reduce the demands of students for faculty time. Students must fill out an application of our own design to be admitted as a major. Students can be admitted only at one time in a semester.

We require students to write an essay explaining their

reasons for selecting a major in advertising and we require them to express their career goals. This is helpful because it requires students to begin thinking very early on about why they want to be in our program. We require new majors to attend an admissions meeting, which covers university, college, and department policy. We make it as clear as we possibly can that meeting degree requirements is a student responsibility and that finding a job after graduation is also a student responsibility. We stress that teaching and advising are only part of the University's expectations for what faculty members are called upon to do and a closed faculty door means that the faculty member is engaged in other expected pursuits. We hold group advising sessions where all the bureaucratic paperwork is processed. We tell students that we are not a walk-in advising center and that students must schedule an appointment with a faculty member through the departmental secretary. We put this all in writing so that students don't misunderstand it.

Finally, we invite students to make appointments just to get to know their faculty advisor. In our admissions meetings we talk quite a bit about our scholarship, intern/practicum program, and anything else that new advertising majors define as relevant. By formalizing admissions and advising, which all faculty voluntarily attend, we have reduced considerably the number of hours students spend in faculty offices.

We distribute the results of our annual surveys to each entering class. This dispels unrealistic notions about entry-

level salaries and ways in which jobs are found. For our graduates, the dominant way to find a job is through contacts the graduate initiates.

In addition to written policies and survey results we offer students copies of our "Atlanta Connection" and our "Nashville Connection." These are lists of advertising graduates in these cities who have volunteered to help recent Tennessee advertising graduates make contacts and gain job interviews. Thus, when students ask for help in locating a job in Atlanta, we give them a ready-made list of 25 industry contacts who have agreed to help. We regularly update the lists.

Formalizing admissions and advising procedures, sharing data about the employment successes of the most recent graduating class, and providing ready-made lists of contacts in specific markets became ways of enhancing the professional seminar.

Professional Seminar: The Structure

At Tennessee, we work from a defined, rationalized, mutually-agreed upon curriculum that requires every course to have a set of objectives, assignments, and material to be covered. Guidelines, which specify only minimum expectations, take precedence over instructor whim, although instructors are encouraged to add, experiment, and go beyond the minimum expectations. These "teaching guidelines" are reviewed and revised periodically and they help to give focus and direction to the overall program. The teaching guidelines for our Professional Seminar include these objectives:

1. To make students familiar with wide range of career opportunities available, to make them familiar with various job titles and the necessary preparation for each, and to encourage them to make decisions about their own careers

2. To teach students how to prepare cover letters and resumes

3. To give students experience in mock interviews and the opportunity to view and critique their own taped interview

4. To assist students in preparing portfolios and other relevant material for job interviews

5. To make students familiar with the University Career Planning and Placement Center, to have them participate in the Center's resume writing and interviewing workshops

6. To discuss issues in advertising as a profession: ethics, gender, turnover, job security, income

Obviously, in 16-18 classroom contact hours not every objective is met equally well nor are the same ones met every semester. The course is still changing and developing as we work with it, an expectation that we have of all courses.

Professional Seminar: The Implementation

Students learn about advertising career options and necessary preparation primarily through tours and selected classroom activities. On our tour schedule each term is a small, boutique-style advertising agency with local clients, a large local outdoor plant, the leading television station in the market, an advertising agency with regional accounts, the local

daily newspaper, and the University's Career Planning and Placement Center. Each tour site is selected to emphasis a particular aspect of the advertising business. For example, the creative boutique visit deals with issues of entrepreneurship in career development and the regional agency visit stresses the teamwork and agency paperflow important in even a single project.

Each tour site is also a practicum sponsor for advertising majors and discussion often centers on the necessity of building relevant work experience while still in college. One benefit of such visits and discussions is that students often decide what they don't want to do. Frequently students shift away from an intended career focus and discover new directions or interests or talents they didn't know were there. The accumulated impression from discussion with the dozen or so individual professionals is that some students, while they struggle to match up their own emerging interests and talents with entry-level jobs and long-term career focus, decide advertising is not a good choice for them and use the major to pursue careers in sales or marketing. Most students (70 percent), however, do move into account services, media planning/sales, copy/design/production, or other advertising-career-beginnings following graduation.

As classroom exercises students are required to develop a private list of personal goals to be accomplished before graduation, to organize and prepare their resumes and sample cover letters, and to practice "selling" themselves to the class.

Professional Seminar: The Payoff

What have been the advantages of instituting the one-hour credit professional seminar? There are several for faculty, the program, and the students.

From the faculty perspective, the number of office hours devoted to student career counseling has been greatly reduced. A typical request several years ago of a last-semester senior was, "How do I write a resume? What should I put on it? How do I organize it? Should I list my GPA?" Now the more typical request is "Will you critique my resume?" These are qualitatively different kinds of questions for seniors to be asking.

Second, from the program perspective, we think the quality and overall reputation of our program has been enhanced within the profession because even our worst graduates leave the program with knowledge and some degree of confidence about how to make the transition from student to professional. Our own surveys indicate that, in fact, the value of the degree as perceived by employers and as reported by our graduates has gone from less than 50 percent evaluating it as a "degree of high quality" to approximately 60 percent doing so. And graduates' own perceptions of the value of the degree has risen from 43 percent rating it as "of high quality" to 85 percent doing so. In addition, the seminar has permitted us to meet the demands of providing career-focused instruction in a program with a managerial perspective.

Finally, the advantages to students have been enormous. All students receive attention and help in getting ready for the job market. Every student's resume and sample cover letter gets a critique. Students do not have to depend on faculty member availability for this instruction. The more persistent and aggressive students probably still get more help, but every student gets some help.

Students are pushed to make decisions early on in the program to do the kinds of things that will make them employable--serving in the intern/practicum program, doing related volunteer work, actively and aggressively pursuing paid summer internships and special programs, improving their GPA, building their portfolios, getting to know people in the profession.

In the early days of our annual surveys we documented a salary discrimination, which appeared to be based on gender (Taylor and Hovland, 1989). We pointed this out to students and encouraged them all to ask for salaries that were equal to the median starting salaries of all graduates. For example, one of our better female graduates was offered a position several years ago in account services at $14,000 with an advertising agency. We suggested that she counter with our survey data that indicated the average starting salary was $17,000. She did, and she got it. In another case, we filed a court deposition to support an undergraduate major who claimed lost wages because of delayed graduation due to an automobile accident. We cited our survey data. She was offered an out-of-court settlement the following

day. While we can not be sure our efforts paid off for all students, we can document that for the last three years there have been no gender-related differences in starting salaries.

Because we phased in the course requirement over a period of several years during a transition from a quarter-system to a semester-system, we have been able to compare graduates in the same year who did take the course with those who did not take the course. Our comparisons do not support that graduates who have taken the course find employment at a faster rate, or secure better positions, or command higher salaries. However, the comparisons do indicate that students who take the course are more likely to pursue and find employment in advertising.

Suggestions for other schools. From our experience, we would recommend, first, that other programs accept the responsibility to teach job search skills, make it part of the regular curriculum, assign teaching credit for it, and require the course of all majors. Job search skills can be elevated from the area of tacit knowledge to formal knowledge and the subsequent benefits to faculty, the program, and the students are well worth the effort.

Second, in integrating such a seminar into a curriculum we recommend making use of all available university auxiliary services, such as a career planning and placement center. In the four years of our course, we have been able to reposition our university's placement center in our own students' minds from "a place strictly for engineering and business students" to "also a

place for advertising majors." Our experience has been very positive in getting the placement center to develop some special programs for our own majors. It is likely that most placement centers would respond similarly when they become aware that a sizable number of students are actively interested in some specialized services by major.

Third, we recommend taking students to the professionals rather than bringing professionals to the classroom. Discussion within a professional, non-classroom environment provides an urgency that impresses on students "this is real and school will soon be over," which leads to the desired acceptance by the student for career planning.

Fourth, we recommend experimenting with the course. In the first year we scheduled the course to meet once a week for one hour for the full semester. Such scheduling hindered any continuity the course might have, and twice-a-week sessions have helped to bring greater focus and continuity to the course.

And, finally, we recommend implementing a tracking system to measure the impact of such a course. In addition to the usual course evaluations and graduate exit interviews, we've found annual surveys of graduates helpful in our own planning and adjusting processes.

No single solution to the dilemma of teaching job search skills to advertising majors will work best for the more than 100 advertising programs in the United States. However, we think that programs--regardless of whether they see themselves as

vocation-oriented or management-oriented--will find it in their own best interests to do so and that such instruction is rightfully a part of an advertising curriculum.

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